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A Love Letter to Farah

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Najwa Sabra is a social worker and an occasional writer. Born in 1986, she is one of the lucky ones who got to experience the nineties in all their glory.

My sister and I used to play a game. We would search our memory (*memories*) for the most ridiculous 90's pop songs to send each other. The rules of the game were strict. The song must be sent in a note, preceded by an elaborate story, a scenario that slowly builds up towards the big reveal. The lyrics should deftly glide in under the guise of a conclusion, providing the perfect ending to the story and the "coup de grâce" for the writer.

Farah always won. As the keeper of our childhood(s), she was always better at remembering the oddest, most niche songs. She ended all her notes with "ih", a sound she invented that somehow still made perfect sense to us, and to no one else. Something in between a teasing laugh and a declaration of effortless triumph. Infuriating.

What started as a contest in silliness quickly turned into a connecting thread, a way to remain in each other's lives despite living on different continents. Notes went back and forth across time and space, unerring as homing pigeons. In them we used scenes of our daily lives as a prelude to the songs: Farah's adventures in Cairo taxis, my insomniac nights which inspired me to recall Ziad Ghosn's [vengeful song](#) where he vows to break his ex's spirit ("law yib2a min 3omri yawm/ 7alif baddi bakkiki/... ya khaybit amali fiki"), the fact that September's "Back to School" billboards reminded us of this (quite pedophilic) [song](#) by Zein el-Omor that we grew up listening to:

*Throw away this school uniform
So we could fly away together
I could not possibly
Wait till the end of winter
To your parents, tomorrow, I will say:
There are only three options
Kill or be killed, or they let me have you¹*

That was what passed for romance then, how we, and other little schoolgirls, learned about love.²

¹ Literally - badly - translated.

² What am I saying? This hasn't changed; some twenty years later, Fares Karam is telling young girls that a real man doesn't stand for an educated, let alone working girl.

Later, the notes stopped but the songs kept flowing. Beyond being an excuse to stay in touch, they became our way of occasionally sending each other a fast-acting dose of instantaneous solace. There's hardly anything [Amro Diab](#) can't fix. I write this as "7abaitik ma kensh fi bali el 7ob el 7a2i2i ydee3/ walla edi 7al el dunia, bitfarra2 fi el ouloub" plays in my head). 90's pop songs have the magical power of transforming moods and healing wounds. In them, we find a sense of nostalgic familiarity, but also - dare I say mostly - comic relief in the face of the horrifying absurdity of their lyrics.

Farah always picks the best songs.

My sister and I - or is it our entire generation? - draw comfort from the cheesy sound of our childhood, anchored in our minds from hours of watching AMTV on Saturday mornings and recording cassettes full of our favorite songs directly from the radio (only Farah had the level of expertise to catch the songs right from the beginning).



We recorded everything that was on heavy rotation at the time: [I Wanna Love You](#), by Solid Harmonie (we once caught our little cousin singing it as "Amamamove you"), [Magapay](#) by Angelina Dimitriou (I'm sure we all butchered those Greek lyrics), and of course the classics by Backstreet Boys, Spice girls, and ...uhm... [La Bouche](#).

Bur we recorded more than just songs. Farah had invented a fictional character, Farrouha al-Merwaha, complete with an eccentric accent, a sharp voice and an extravagant laugh. Farrouha al-Merwaha was large and shameless. She earned her name, not because of her weight, as one might think, but because of her world-famous farts. Farrouha al-Merwaha was loud, vulgar, confident, and fierce. She danced, sang, and discussed her bodily functions openly and proudly. She was everything we were told not to be.

Together with Abir, our cousin, we would fill cassettes with fictional interviews and made-up songs; we were the silliest. We were light and happy. One time, during one of our recording sessions, we laughed so hard, for so long, that we couldn't hear our dad repeatedly calling us from the other room. Would you listen to our precious cassette today; you'd hear our intense laughs interrupted by a loud angry shout: "Shut the fuck up!" Catching dad red handed cursing on tape remains one of our childhood's proudest exploits. After the initial shock, we dissolved into giggles. Another time, we laughed so hard that one of us - I won't say more, we were all sworn to secrecy - peed herself.

When I look back at the fun times in our childhood, I can stir up a lot of happy memories. I am lucky this way. I think back to family outings to the Luna Park, to that one Christmas when I got more gifts than I could've wished for, including an electric puppy that could flip, those Sunday mornings when I was allowed to make my own Manakish at Abu Ziad's bakery (which sadly ceased to exist since) and then go watch the puppet show that our 18-year old upstairs neighbor regularly put on for all the children in the building. I loved those puppet shows, and I loved our sweet neighbor who, hiding behind a white sheet, would transport us to a magical world.³ But nothing made me as happy as our silly afternoons, huddled around our stereo.

Those cassettes were our most treasured possessions; Our fortune. When we wanted to punish our little brother for being an annoying 11-year old, we recorded over his original Micheal Jackson tape. They were also a transgression, our little secret. Along with some hand-made comic books detailing Farrouha's carefree adventures, we kept them hidden in a box under the stairs at Abir's place in Bourj al-Barajneh. I wonder where they ended up now.

Farah had a Walkman. Well, she had many. She doesn't have the best of luck with electronics, she would always say. They would break down, mysteriously disappear, get stolen. She was never without her music. She was the coolest person I knew. I tried to copy her in everything she did, her fashion sense, her musical taste, her hair style. And so, just like her, I wore wide shirts and baggy pants, I decided -surprise, surprise- that Mostafa Amar and Celine Dion were also my favorite singers, and I braided my hair overnight so it would have the same curls as hers. To my great distress, I was unsuccessful in that quest. I tried to go wherever Farah went, to be friends with her friends. I drove her crazy. Farah was already her own person and I was still trying to turn into one. So I tried to turn into Farah. I could not think of a better person to model myself on.

If today I still find comfort in 90's music, despite its questionable quality, it is because it takes me back to a time when Farah and I were an island, a team. Thick as thieves. Inseparable despite Farah's best efforts. I was stubborn, unshakable. I was Farah's tamagotchi (*Zazoo, for us having grown up in Lebanon*) and she miraculously kept me alive.

³ We would later stop being invited for Sunday shows and silently witness as her family, and the neighborhood, intently try to break her spirit for having married - and divorced - a man from another religious denomination against her family's wishes. From her, we learned creativity, and an early lesson in the heavy price girls who don't conform have to pay. She was never the same again.

Farah kept me alive, literally by saving me when I fell upside down behind our corner sofa, and every day since then by paving the way, always taking that first hardest step so I didn't have to. I cannot think of the nineties without seeing Farah's determined face in front of me. Farah breaking the rules, breaking the silence, shattering chains. Farah breaking the family and building it back, better -- making us all better by her mere existence amongst us.

Farah is my family, my whole family. She made me - makes me - almost as much as my genetic makeup does.

Farah is my nineties. She was my shield and my rock as I navigated the choppy waters of growing up as a girl in a place that is against you from the get-go. I knew how to rebel because she had shown me, but more often than not, I did not need to because she had fought the battle for both of us.

Farah and I have this saying. We always say that we take turns being the big sister to each other. But, deep down, I knew I could never measure up. Farah would always win at being the big sister. She wins at all our games. Farah the trailblazer. My sister, my keeper. I am forever in your debt. I love you.